SOCIALSECURITY

G ROLL STORY

Volume 3, Number

An official publication of the Social Security Administration

July / August 1998

SOCIAL SECURITY 'dot' INFORMATION PLEASE

I think this is a wonderful website ... An easy to use service ... A good way of obtaining information ... A boon to people who have a hearing impairment ... I wish the rest of the lederal government would follow your lead in providing services online

ion wyoth lear in proving set vies omne... This is so convenient. I love being able to request information from my own home ... Much better than waiting on the telephone or trekking down to my local Social Security office 36 miles away.

These are examples of just a few of the 7,000 messages Social Security receives from the public about its Internet service every month. In addition to the numerous messages of praise and appreciation, about 3,000 need some sort of personal reply to answer a question or resolve a prob-

lem. Responding to the questions or problems is the job of Social Security's Internet Response Team.

"People want to know more about Social Security," says Nancy Pantoulis, one of the team members. "We're in the papers everyday and people want to know if Social Security's going to be there for them. They want specific information about our programs."

Most responses are made within three business days. Team member Joe Giordano points out that "People are not used to getting a response this quickly by conventional means."

Internet users send messages by filling in a website feedback form. They click on a feedback form button, enter their message, and include an e-mail address if they want a response. It's that simple. If you've never visited Social Security's web site, it might be a good idea to stop by. The address is www.ssa.gov. You'll find an encyclopedia of information and material about Social Security, nearly 10,000 pages in all.

"We've had everybody contact us," says Team Leader Barbara Howard.

"Right now, our heaviest workload is from the baby boomers. They'll be retiring soon and they're getting ready. We also get a lot of inquiries from young people in the workforce, just wanting to check on their earnings to make sure they are correct and to project their future benefits."

The Internet Response Team uses e-mail to respond to most messages over the Internet. However, because of security concerns, customers are discouraged from including personal information, such as their Social Security number, in their messages. And replies that require the disclosure of personal information are handled over the telephone or by mail. In time, Social Security hopes to overcome this restriction with appropriate encryption technology.

The bottom line is the Internet is one more way of providing customer service. Some people prefer the face-to-face contact they get in a field office, others like to contact Social Security by telephone at our field offices or at our 800 number, but for a growing number of people, it's www.ssa.gov.



BENEFICIARY

SAG FOUNDERSTILL TEACHES WINNERS



Francis Lederer does not consider his accomplishments to be significant. However, at 98, he is one of the most accomplished actors of this century. I had the opportunity to interview him at the American National Academy of Performing Arts in Studio City, CA, which he founded in 1957. He continues to teach a weekly workshop for actors there, just as he has for the past 41 years, with great enthusiasm and passion for his craft.

Born Frantisek Lederer in Prague, Czechoslovakia, his stage career progressed rapidly while touring with various production companies throughout Europe. His early repertoire included roles in plays by Shakespeare, Ibsen and Shaw. His versatility became evident when he appeared in musical comedies as a song and dance man. Roles in silent films soon followed.

> Francis' role in the classic 1928 German silent film, "Pandora's Box," was a pivotal point in his career.

Considered avante garde for its time, the film drew the attention of audiences and critics alike. By his late 20s, Francis emerged as a matinee idol in Berlin, Vienna and other European cities. He recalls that the transition from silent

movies to "talkies" was easy. "As an actor, the performances were the same, you act and react to your fellow actors.

Appearing in a musical on the London stage, Francis learned to speak English phonetically. He extended his London stage success with the romantic comedy "Autumn Cross." Rewarded with rave reviews, he came to the United States in 1932 to reprise his role on Broadway. This turned out to be his ticket to a Hollywood contract. From 1928-1959, Francis appeared in more than 30 feature films, such as "Romance in Manhattan," "My American Wife," "One Rainy Afternoon," "Midnight," "The Man I Married," "A Woman of Distinction" and "The Ambassador's Daughter." When asked about his favorite film role, he says, 'I loved them all. The challenge was finding the essence in each part."

As a Hollywood player, he took part in the earliest discussions about the formation



of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG). Accordingly, he is one of SAG's earliest members.

Over the years, Francis varied his career between stage and screen in extremely diverse roles. "Terror Is A Man," filmed in 1959, was Francis' last feature film, but not because his passion for acting waned. At age 60, he was ready to move in new directions. He entered the medium of television and returned to his roots performing live on "Playhouse 90." He also appeared on "Ben Casey," "The Untouchables," "Mission Impossible" and "Night Gallery."

At a stage in life when many people think about retirement, Francis decided to teach. His desire to share his knowledge and experience with other actors led to the establishment of the Academy. Its walls are filled with photos and stories about former students, among them Helen Hunt, 1997 Academy Award winner for best actress.

After he and wife Marion married in July 1941, they settled in Canoga Park, a Los Angeles suburb. Francis took great interest in his community and served as Honorary Mayor of Canoga Park, CA, for 26 years. While he was the Commissioner of the Department of Parks and Recreations for the City of Los Angeles, Marion was the Commissioner of Cultural Affairs. Francis also served as president of the American National Theater and Academy and director of its Academy of Performing Arts. He has been receiving Social Security retirement benefits since 1965.

When asked about the secret of his longevity, Francis says, "the secret is to live a long time." He and Marion exercise every day. And if you ask about his hobbies, he is emphatic that his only hobby is "living life." His philosophy about life and acting is simple: "learn by doing."

Francis Lederer does not consider his accomplishments significant. I respectfully disagree. At 98, his dedication to his craft is extraordinary; his zest for living, contagious. This remarkable man continues to inspire others, and this may be his greatest achievement.

BENEFITS TO PRISONERS SUSPENDED

From March 1997 to April 1998, Social Security suspended Supplemental Security Income (SSI) payments to over 44,000 prisoners who are ineligible to receive them. For that same period, 4,059 prison facilities received incentive payments for providing information that resulted in the suspension of SSI to prisoners.

Federal law prohibits paying SSI to people who are confined in jails, prisons and certain public institutions for more than 30 days. For confinements beginning March 1997 and later, the law also provides incentive payments to penal institutions for promptly reporting inmate data to Social

Security that leads to the suspension of SSI payments. Money for SSI payments comes from taxpayer dollars, not from the Social Security trust funds.

Limited staffing and financial resources have made it difficult for some jurisdictions throughout the U.S. to comply with the federal government's request for inmate information. The incentive payments help to offset some of the costs that law enforcement agencies incur to collect data. State and local penal facilities that want to participate in the incentive payment program must sign reporting agreements with Social Security. Participants are required to transmit information electronically to Social Security's central office in Baltimore, MD

Since 1995, Social Security has suspended SSI payments to more than 200,000 prison

ers. Increased participation of state and local law enforcement agencies helps save taxpayer dollars and ensures that SSI payments are made only to eligible individuals.

Social Security Today is published bimonthly. Permission is given to reprint articles, pictures and information. Please credit the Social Security Administration as the source. Direct corresp Editor, Social Security Today, 4-J-10 West High Rise, 6401 Security Boulevard, Baltimore, MD 21235 or send e:mail to Richard.W.Schwartz@ssa.gov. Social Security Today is also available at www.ssa.gov

If you'd like more information about any of the items in Social Security Today, call Social Security at 1-800-772-1213 weekdays between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. To get through as fast as possible, call early in the day. Other good times to call are later in the week and later in the month. If you have access to the Internet, ou can also get a variety of information about Social Security at www.ssa.gov.

COMMSSIONERS MESSAGE



Kenneth S. Apfel Commissioner of Social Security

Supplemental Security Income (SSI) provides financial assistance to 6.5 million aged, blind and disabled individuals who have little income or

resources. These people are among the most vulnerable members of our society. For them, SSI is often the program of last resort, the safety net that protects them from impoverishment.

While the SSI rolls grew substantially between 1985 and 1994, in the last four years there has been little or no growth in the number of people on the SSI rolls. There are several reasons: one is the strong national economy; but another is the increased attention that Social Security has been devoting to SSI program integrity.

It is important to note that much of what is often characterized as SSI program fraud is, in reality, payment inaccuracy. The SSI program requires an individual's needbased eligibility to be matched with his or her income, resources and living arrangements – on a monthly basis. All sources of an individual's income, as well as any assets, have to be considered. Some individuals

forget to report some of these items to us. Others may not understand what we need to know, and still others may not fully understand that their financial accounts or real property may affect their SSI eligibility.

This can lead to payment inaccuracies. Payment inaccuracy, unlike fraud that results from a deliberate act of deception, is caused by inadvertent failure to report a change in eligibility criteria. Or, it may be caused by changes that are reported after the monthly benefit has been paid.

For example, every time the wages of a disabled child's parents fluctuate because of working extra hours, the possibility of an overpayment exists. Or a slight change in a bank account balance, or an unanticipated living arrangement change may cause an overpayment.

Several initiatives we are taking will improve the current payment accuracy rate of 94.5 percent to better than 96 percent by 2002. Such an improvement will save taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars in SSI program funds.

Some of these initiatives involve computer data matching, which currently results in a benefit-to-cost ratio of 8-to-1. Social Security is pursuing new and more frequent matches to give us more current information than we now have. For example:

- We will soon begin quarterly matching beneficiary payments with earnings data from all states through the Office of Child Support Enforcement.
- We have been looking into the possibility of electronically verifying amounts of

resources in applicants' and beneficiaries' bank accounts.

 During 1998, we began to match data from the Health Care Financing Administration, twice a year, to identify individuals in nursing homes in all states who are no longer eligible for full monthly SSI payments.

We have also increased our continuing disability reviews for both the SSI and Social Security disability programs to ensure that only those individuals who are truly eligible receive benefits.

Although the most significant results in strengthening the SSI program come from improved payment accuracy and debt collection, fraud still remains a significant concern. Social Security and the Social Security Office of the Inspector General have developed a comprehensive anti-fraud plan called "Zero Tolerance for Fraud." It has three goals:

- to change programs, systems and operations to reduce instances of fraud;
- to eliminate wasteful practices that erode public confidence in Social Security; and
- to prosecute rigorously those who undermine the integrity of our programs.

Social Security has long recognized the dual responsibilities we have as stewards of the SSI program. We must show compassion for the well-being of the people this valuable program serves, and we must be always vigilant of the use of taxpayer dollars that fund the program.

NEWS FOR THE FORTY-SOMETHING SET

If you're reaching the big "4-0" within the next 12 months, you're going to be getting a message from Social Security. No, it won't be telling you it's time to retire. But it will give you information to help you

plan your financial future, including your retirement.

Like the rest of the more than 30 million people in the 40 through 47 age group, you can expect to receive a Personal Earnings and Benefit Estimate Statement from Social Security sometime between October 1, 1998, and March 31, 1999. About 24 million statements will be mailed before December 15, with the remainder mailed between January 15 and March 31. (People in older age groups should have already received their statements).

Your statement will list, year by year, the earnings your employers (or you, if you're self-employed) reported to Social Security. If your records don't agree, be sure to let Social Security know right away.

The statement also will provide you with estimates of the Social Security benefits that you and your family may be eligible for now and in the future. And you'll see that Social Security is more than just a program for retired people. Social Security will provide payments for you and for your dependents if you become severely disabled and it will



help support your family when you die.

Beginning in October 1999, all workers 25 and older will receive an annual statement of the earnings that have been posted to their Social Security record,

along with an estimate of benefits they (and their family) may be eligible to receive. The statements will help workers make sure their earnings are correctly reported so they'll be sure to get credit for all their earnings when they apply for Social Security benefits.

If you're between 40 and 47 years of age and don't receive a statement by March 31, you can request one by contacting Social Security at 1-800-772-1213. Ask for a Request For Earnings and Benefit Estimate Statement. You can get the information even faster by completing the request form on Social Security's web site, www.ssa.gov.

If you have questions about the information on your statement or about Social Security, visit www.ssa.gov or call 1-800-772-1213. And by the way, if you're wondering how Social Security got your address, it was furnished by the Internal Revenue Service.

WHEN YOU CHANGE

You've heard about direct deposit - it's safe, secure and convenient. And maybe you're already using it. But what happens if you want to change banks? Maybe you've moved, or found a better interest rate.

Whatever the reason, if you want to change your direct deposit account to a different bank, credit union or savings and loan, it's easy. Using direct deposit doesn't stop you from making a change. You are in control. But be sure to wait to close your old account until after you start receiving payments in your new account.

The best way to change your account is to visit the new bank, credit union or savings and loan you've selected. There you can explain that you want to open an account and use direct deposit. They'll complete all the forms and send the information to Social Security. Or you can call Social Security toll free at 1-800-772-1213 and change your direct deposit by telephone. If you call us, you'll need to have your new account number, your Social Security number and your bank routing number

WHAT'S NEW ONFAX

Do you know how the year 2000 will affect Social Security payments? Or how loans affect Supplemental Security Income (SSI) payments? A number of new factsheets have been added to the Fax catalog recently and are now available. Here's a run down on some that may be of interest to you.

> 144 SSI Spotlight On Financial Institution Accounts

> 145 SSI Spotlight On Loans

146 SSI Spotlight OnThe Prerelease Procedure

160 Social Security And The Year 2000

273 Supplemental Security Income For Noncitizens

To get any of the factsheets listed above, call Social Security's Fax line at 1-888-475-7000 from a touch-tone phone. A voice menu will lead you through the steps vou need to follow. You'll need the document number shown. You do not have to call from a Fax machine, but you will need to supply your Fax number.

You can also request Social Security's complete, 11-page Fax Catalogue. The document number is 0. Social Security's fax line operates 24 hours a day. You can request up to three documents each time you call.

KEEPING YOUR SOCIAL SECURITY ON TRACK

In an ideal world, every worker's earnings would be reported correctly to Social Security so they could be properly posted on each individual's earnings record. Social Security uses an individual's lifetime earnings record to

compute his or her benefit amount ... the higher the earnings, the larger the benefit. However, in the real world, reporting errors do occur and a small percentage of earnings cannot be posted to the correct earnings record.

When this happens, the earnings are placed in what we call a "suspense" file. Usually it's because a worker's name and Social Security number on the wage reports do not match the information shown in Social Security's records. Of the more than 220 million wage items that Social Security processes yearly, about 4 percent fail to pass name and Social Security number match up. Common errors include misspelled names or the use of nicknames, transposed numerals in the Social Security number or use of an entirely wrong number.

Before placing earnings in "suspense," Social Security tries to match the reported earnings to the correct wage earner through an extensive search of computer records. Social Security may also contact employers or workers to

resolve discrepancies. These efforts reduce the actual suspense rate to 1.5 percent. And even after items are placed in the "suspense file," Social Security continues to seek resolution.

Over 46 percent of reporting errors occur in three industries: agriculture - 16.8 percent, services — 16.3 percent, and bars and restaurants — 13.2 percent.

To help reduce this problem even further, Social Security has prepared a special information kit, Social Security: What Employers and Employees Need to Know. The kit describes the Social Security program, explains the relationship between benefits and earnings, and shows the steps employers and employees can take to ensure that earnings are correctly posted. The kit is available on the Internet at www.ssa.gov/employers.

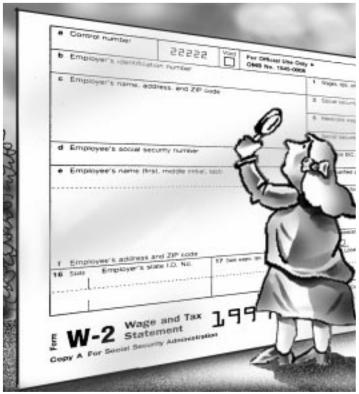
Workers can help prevent reporting errors by protecting their own Social Security numbers and cards from misuse, by making sure that employers have their correct names and Social Security numbers and by reporting name

changes to Social Security promptly. They should also check their W-2 statements carefully to verify that their Social Security numbers, names, addresses and wage information are correct.

To verify the amount of earnings posted to their Social Security earnings records, workers can request a Personal Earnings and Benefit Estimate Statement (PEBES) from Social Security. The PEBES also provides an estimate of the monthly benefits payable to a worker and to eligible family members in the event of retirement, disability or death. A PEBES request form (SSA-7004) is available by calling Social Security at 1-800-772-1213. Internet users can request the form at www.ssa.gov. It takes about six weeks after returning the completed request to 1. SEC. receive a

PEBES by mail

Social Security Administration SSA Publication No. 05-10110



SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS 4-J-10 WEST HIGH RISE BALTIMORE MD 21235

OFFICIAL BUSINESS PENALTY FOR PRIVATE USE, \$300

FIRST CLASS MAIL POSTAGE AND FEES PAID SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION PERMIT NO. G-11